

Idols (?) of our times

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Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and keywords:

Every society has always had and continues to have their idols, heroes and "stars". As László Hemrik (2008) stated rather blasphemously, the most important idol and icon of all times has been Jesus. No other person has exerted such an important influence on mankind and no other individual has been portrayed in so many paintings as Jesus Christ. It was not by chance, that Hemrik's opinion was widely acknowledged internationally following the *Jesus Christ Superstar* Rock Opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

In the past, historically important kings and emperors, heroes such as important warriors were role models and filled the function of idols. Nowadays, these roles are filled by certain persons who are "pushed" by the media, who often become internationally famous stars uniquely thanks to "publicity". What role model and what values do they pass on to children and young people? *What* makes certain persons the stars and idols of our times, anyway? Which idols do boys choose and which ones girls? Do children and young people even actually have a *choice* or are their idols *imposed*?

Similar topics:

Media influence; personal and physical traits of male and female idols and stars; a reflection about your own values and character traits; self-evaluation.

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Make a collage entitled "*Our Stars*".
- Worksheet 2: Working in pairs, prepare a *TV interview with a famous person*.
- Bring from home: as many as possible colourful youth newspapers and magazines such as: Bravo, Bravo Girl, Bravo Sport, PopCorn, etc.), billboards, posters and other colourful magazines to cut out from.
- Large packaging paper or cardboard paper to make the collage.
- Multi-coloured felt-tip pens.
- A pair of scissors, glue, Blue-Tack adhesive.
- If possible: Internet access with printing possibilities.

Duration:

About one class session including a variation (for variations/continuation, it could be extended to two class sessions)

Number of participants:

Feasible with any class size

Age:

- About 9 year olds and onwards (third grade)

- Well suited for various classes (i.e. mother tongue or foreign language instruction, natural and social science class and manual training, art class, multimedia classes, etc.), afternoon supervision, youth activities

Aims:

- To promote social skills (pair work and group work);
- To develop skills in describing individuals (appearance, personal traits);
- To formulate expectations;
- To draw a comparison (idols vs. myself/ourselves);
- To improve oral communication skills (greater fluency in expressing personal opinions freely);
- To express agreement/disagreement;
- To reduce clichés related to "idols", "stars" from the media;
- To work with stereotypes (to reduce stereotypes).

(Short) Explanation:

In a homogenous small group, the children are to make a collage (a poster) with pictures of their "stars" and "idols", before they list their personal and physical traits. Using a snowball procedure, they should discuss their experiences and collect common traits in pairs, then in two groups of two, then in four groups, etc. and finally with the entire class.

Activity steps:

1. For this class period, the children and teachers should bring from home the largest number of colourful youth magazines such as: Bravo, Bravo Girl, Bravo Sport, Popcorn, etc.), posters, billboards and other colourful magazines for the purpose of cutting out of, as well.

The children should spontaneously choose a partner that they would like to work with. It is important that homogeneous, small groups are developed. If possible, there should be access to the Internet with printing possibilities for this class period.

2. Working in pairs, the children should make a collage with pictures of their idols and stars (one idol per child) in about 20 minutes. They may either cut pictures out of newspapers and magazines or print pictures from the Internet. The children should paste the pictures on sheets of paper (or cardboard) and discuss together about why they have chosen these stars and write as many as possible *personal and physical traits* (adjectives) of the stars chosen. (Worksheet 1)
3. After 20 minutes they should discuss their experiences and collect common physical and personal traits of their stars using the snowball procedure in two all-girl or all-boy groups of two and then in four-groups, etc. and finally with the entire class.
4. Lastly, all of the posters are posted on the wall and the children are requested to reflect on this activity in class discussion.

Reflection:

The results from the collages and posters can be compared and discussed along the lines of the following aspects:

- Look at the poster again and compare:
 - Which star was selected by several of you in the class? Where did you first hear about that star? What is his/her profession?
 - What are the personal traits of this star?

- Why do you like him or her? Why are they likeable?
- Does he/she also have some negative traits? Which ones?
- Have more males or females been chosen?
 - What personal and physical traits do males/females have? Compare them.
- Do you want to be like the star on the poster? Give reasons for your answer.
- Choose two traits that you would also like to have. Give reasons for your answer. Why are those important traits?
- Think about a person (i.e. a family member, relative, a friend (girl or boy), an acquaintance...), that you know well, you like very much and that you could adopt as a role model.
 - List the positive traits of this person.
 - Compare his/her traits with those of stars. What did you notice? Do they have anything in common or not? Why?

Variations (continuation):

Suggestion 1a:

One child at a time (and possibly in another class session) can present his/her star or another star of their choice, speaking in the first person (i.e. "I-form"...) and describe a "typical" day for them. The participants are to guess which star they mean. The one who guesses correctly, takes their turn next and can choose a new star.

Suggestion 1b:

The star chosen can also be acted out or presented in a role play or a pantomime and then guessed.

Suggestion 2:

A child comes up to the front of the classroom or sits in the middle of a circle. He/she thinks about a star or a famous person from the past or present. The other children have to try and guess who this person is by asking questions. Answers can only be given with "yes" or "no". The child that guesses correctly comes next and thinks about the name of another famous person.

Suggestion 3:

This activity can be supplemented by having the children prepare a TV Interview in pairs (see Worksheet 2) using role cards A and B. One child plays the role of the reporter and asks the other partner (i.e. acting as the famous person) about his/her profession, family, plans for the future, etc.

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

"Looking at the next generation's models, idols or stars goes hand in hand with exploring the orientations and role models of children and youth. Do role models still serve as references for teenagers today or is such behaviour seen as outmoded and behind the times among peers? If in fact they still serve as role models, then who in their eyes, are models and what function does the choice of a role model have on the process of growing up? The question can be formulated differently from the perspective of the subject of their imagination: What is the common denominator between Britney Spears, Michael Jordan, Stephen Hawking, Stefan Raab, Busta Rhymes, Lady Diana, Mother Theresa and Zlatko from the Big Brother House?" – as Klaus Waldmann questioned in a study published in 2000.

Role models, idols and stars are no new phenomenon. They have always existed in human society and they will certainly continue to exist in the future as well. In referring to the process where individuals identify with role models, Sigmund Freud saw this as a psychodynamic process where an individual attempts to take on the character traits of the role model and behave in certain situations like the role model would. It is clear in

the case of small children that parents clearly represent the most important reference persons, i.e. role models. This situation changes during puberty years where teenagers become more distant, developing an ability to criticize and judge and as a result are more attracted to self-chosen role models, idols or friends. They develop "a sense of belonging together and a feeling of acceptance and of being loved." Likewise, according to Rupp (2006), there is no difference when a young persons' favourite celebrity star or ideal serves as an example and consequently provides a direction alternative to young people by setting behaviour standards.

Who do we label as "idols" or "stars"? Waldmann (2000) defined them as follows: "They stand out from ordinary and run-of the mill persons. They are the icons for a certain profession, they represent specific cultural practices and stand for a certain kind of lifestyle." According to Rupp (2006), often reservations are expressed about these role models. She states that this is because their idols - being a product of society - are introduced to the individual from the outside and therefore become stereotypes, extraneous to the person itself and are being belittled for being pedagogic and admonitory",... Stars and idols nowadays mainly come from the film, pop and sports scene and with the help of the media, become the target of extraordinary attention — that we would not even indulge in for our own family members —, tremendous interest and singular care and are even being indirectly supported financially, yes downright "pampered".

According to Hemrik (2008), unlike in the case of role models from earlier eras, today we no longer *honour* 21st century stars, we are much more *jealous* of them and yet we are prepared, to give them our undivided attention. In addition, Hemrik claimed that, Reality Shows (i.e. Big Brother) are a good example of the fact that everyone is quite eager to watch them. When a person has been the focus of attention for a long enough time on television (in the Internet), then he/she has already become a star. Ákos Szilágyi (2000) reported how television and the computer could create a mass culture from traditional history — often even soap operas. From discussions amongst reputable writers of fairy tales and youth literature as well as child psychologists (Gyóri 2000), it is clear that the old fairy tales with their heroes and idols are gradually disappearing from child and youth culture and that they are being replaced, (with the help of television and the Internet), with a kind of sub-culture, where children are treated like "small adults".

In *Jugendkultur (Youth Culture) 1940 – 1985*, Zinnecker (1987) describes in detail how this is happening. He stressed the trend for an increasingly greater *gender gap* when it comes to role models and idols preferred by 15 – 17 year olds. For women, traits such as style, personality, physical beauty are important and women can much more easily identify with their idols than men. In contrast, men consider important traits and achievements to include profession, sports achievements, success, perseverance, assertiveness and financial situation. Of course, the media (television, the Internet, the print media) is primarily responsible for the development of these gender-specific clichés and stereotypes. Unfortunately, in certain youth newspapers, television shows and Internet pages for young people, the above-referenced "superficial" topics were addressed in relation to their idols. On the other hand, no reference was made of topics related to the real social environment, such as jobs, unemployment, financial difficulties, competition, training and schools. (Zinnecker 1987). A comprehensive study by Zinnecker (2002, cf. also: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vorbild>) shows that young people clearly focus on idols and stars for orientation as role models. At the time of the study, 60% of youth in Germany indicated that they had a role model (prominent "celebs" from the media world such as athletes, pop and rock singers, actors) outside the family and their immediate circle of friends and acquaintances.

What can teachers, educators and parents do so that the "traditional" role models are also maintained alongside the new idols? According to the Zsubrits study in 2002, young people and even very young children in pre-puberty are exposed to influences coming from the world of stardom and the media in Hungary. In view of this trend, it seems

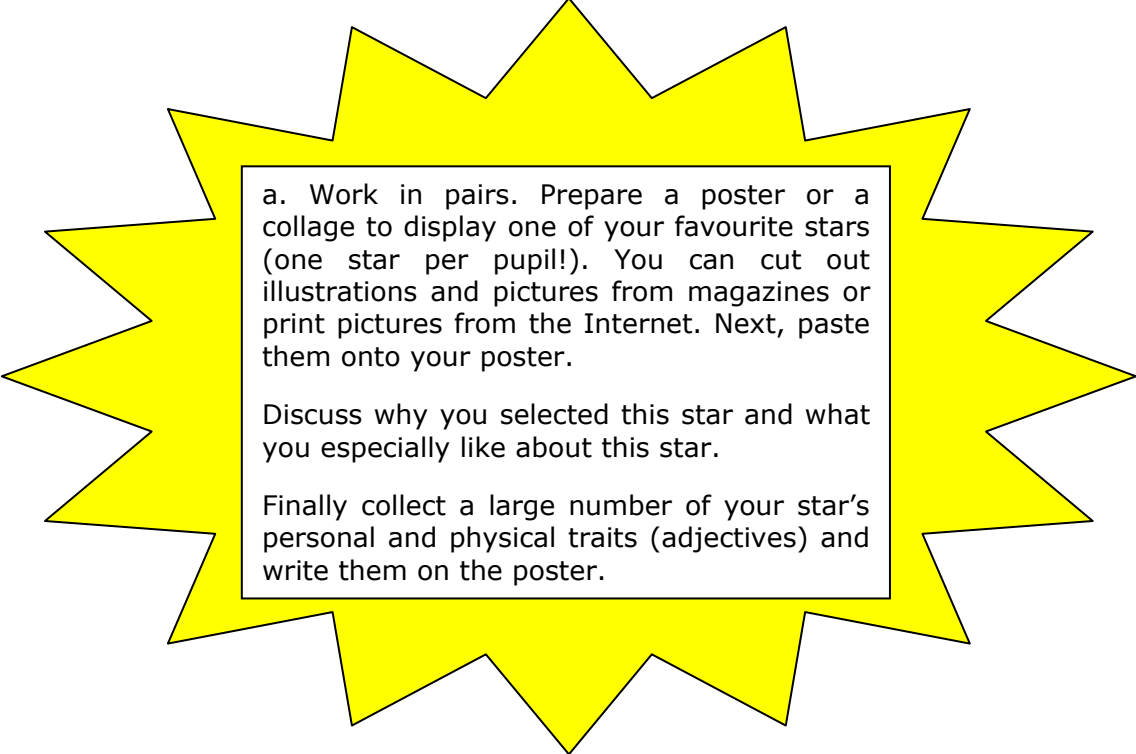
noteworthy that the Hungarian National Curriculum (Nemzeti Alaptanterv) stipulates the introduction in schools of a new subject called "Visual Elements and Media Knowledge" geared to 13 to 15 year old students. Moreover, it should be stressed, that visual as well as print media (youth newspapers such as *Bravo*) should be handled critically and sensibly. Parents and schools have an important role to play in this regard. Children and young people should be in a position to perceive what is reality and to be made aware that the media often only represents quasi-reality, and tries to fabricate a dream world which reproduces a greatly reduced, simplified, idealized world-view (Rupp 2006). Young adults- as easily manipulated recipients of this illusory world- are thus equipped with different tools and social skills in order to understand the stereotypes and clichés constructed by the media in order to be able to competently "dissect them" as well.

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Worksheet 1:

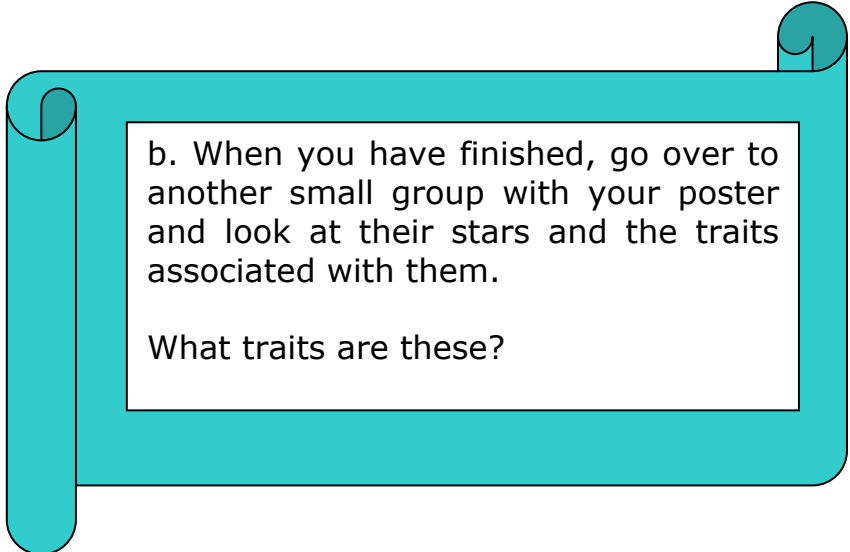
Our stars



a. Work in pairs. Prepare a poster or a collage to display one of your favourite stars (one star per pupil!). You can cut out illustrations and pictures from magazines or print pictures from the Internet. Next, paste them onto your poster.

Discuss why you selected this star and what you especially like about this star.

Finally collect a large number of your star's personal and physical traits (adjectives) and write them on the poster.

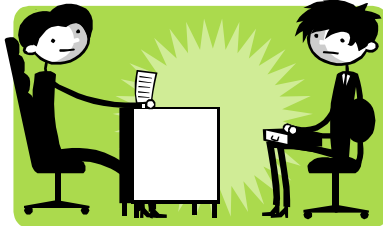


b. When you have finished, go over to another small group with your poster and look at their stars and the traits associated with them.

What traits are these?

Worksheet 2:

TV Interview with a famous person


Role card A:

Imagine yourself, 20 years from now, you are very famous and successful at your job.

A T.V. reporter (your partner) is interviewing you. Carry out the conversation with your partner and answer the questions you are asked.

Role card B:

You are a reporter and you are conducting a TV interview with a famous person.

Ask him/her questions using the following keywords:

- School graduation
- Career choice- why?
- First successes
- Family life (parents, spouse, children)
- Hobbies, leisure time
- Circle of friends
- Housing accommodations
- Plans for the future